From Timbuktu to here: Timbuktu’s manuscript heritage

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MnM Commentary No 24

Timbuktu is a symbol of Africa’s written intellectual heritage long before the arrival of European colonialism. The sheer quantity of its manuscripts bears witness to that indisputable fact. As a metaphor, or symbol, of knowledge, Timbuktu includes both the actual city and settlement of Timbuktu and its surrounding world. From the building of its grand mosque called Djingere-Ber in 1325, it became a centre of knowledge in West Africa alongside the older cities of Jenne and Biru (Walata). And by 1501 it eclipsed both Jenne and Walata to become the centre of Islamic knowledge and the symbol of Islam’s intellectual tradition in West Africa. Timbuktu’s written intellectual tradition is a part of the larger Islamic intellectual heritage. Although much younger than older centres of knowledge such as Iraq, Egypt, Morocco and Andalusia, its contribution to the body of knowledge of the Islamic intellectual tradition is substantial. The manuscripts show that Timbuktu’s scholars were concerned with all the disciplines of the Muslim knowledge tradition such as law, theology, language sciences, Hadith, politics, exegesis, astronomy (and related fields), medicine, music, history, literature, mysticism and philosophy. In short they covered all the so-called ‘argumentative’ or ‘discursive’ (aqli) and ‘historical’ (naqli) disciplines.

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A conservative estimate put the number of manuscripts found in Timbuktu’s archives (the city and desert) at 100,000. The Institute Haute Etude et Recherché Islamique Ahmad Baba (IHERI-AB) popularly known as the Ahmad Baba Centre, the only public manuscript library, houses around 31,000 manuscripts. There are a number of private family collections, each of which house anything between 1000 and 12,000 manuscripts. The four largest private manuscript libraries formed the Association Tombouctienne de Sauvegarde et de Valorisation des Manuscrits et pour la Défense de la Culture Islamique (SAVAMA-DCI). The most common category of manuscript seems to be legal, more specifically Islamic substantive law and the *fatwa* genre. (I say ‘seems’ simply because of the number of manuscripts that await proper reading and categorisation.) But the numbers of manuscripts dealing with history, politics cum theology (mostly nineteenth century and local), astronomy, *tasawwuf* (both theoretical and local intra- *sufi* polemics), exegesis and language-related subjects are considerable. From this rather brief account it should be clear that we are dealing with a great written intellectual tradition.

By way of example, among Timbuktu’s hundreds of manuscripts, I want to draw attention to the *fatwa* and history materials, basically for two reasons: one, my own work on Timbuktu’s manuscript materials focused on these two areas and, two, the possibilities these two areas hold for the decolonisation of knowledge. I will return to the latter point at the end of this brief account.

I begin with the *fatwa* materials. Firstly, *fatwas* are a genre of Muslim legal literature; a *fatwa* is a legal opinion on any subject from commerce, to domestic disputes, dietary laws, sexual matters and even political criticism. As an area of knowledge within ‘Timbuktu studies’ they remain largely *terra incognita*. This includes study from a purely legal angle, that is, how Islamic law functioned in Timbuktu long after the fourth century *hijri*/tenth century CE when Islamic law allegedly reached its zenith (the so-called ‘closing of the doors’ of *ijtihad*). But this area is also little-known because the city’s *fatwas* are a source for history from below, that is, the social history or practice of its ordinary people not written about in the annals of
the classical Muslim historiographical legacy. My work on Timbuktu’s colonial-era history from below (1894–1960) using fatwas as a historical source is the first of its kind.

We now come to Timbuktu’s history manuscripts. The city has produced a rich historiographical legacy. Its ‘formal’ historiography has generally been limited to its two great seventeenth-century chronicles: the Tarikh al-Fattash and Tarikh al-Sudan – and to a lesser extent two eighteenth-century chronicles. The two seventeenth-century chronicles relate in great detail the structure of the Songhay state (1464–1591). They also speak of Timbuktu’s notables, patrician classes and ulama (scholars, who happened to be mostly notables and from mercantile families).

This history/historiographical legacy has been extensively treated by modern scholars since the end of the nineteenth century, just before the beginning of colonial rule in 1894, but more clearly with and after the establishment of colonial rule and well into the twenty-first century. However, new studies on at least one of the famous seventeenth-century chronicles, in light of new textual evidence, show that historical inquiry has not yet been exhausted, although it has all but halted in the last decade. In addition to Timbuktu’s formal historiography, there is what some have called Timbuktu’s ‘little histories’. These await urgent research in the form of annotated translation and analysis. These ‘little histories’ date mostly to the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries CE. They are ‘little’ histories because they cover the histories of only certain tribes, towns and so on, unlike their seventeenth-century predecessors that covered the histories of two empires. They also lack the sophistication and breadth of sources of their predecessors.

The importance of both Timbuktu’s history and fatwa manuscripts for postcolonial studies, or more appropriately what some call the decolonisation of knowledge, cannot be over-emphasised. In other words, as indicators and sources of intellectual history they are indispensable to the South’s effort and contribution to knowledge production. Beyond being a source of social practice, Timbuktu’s colonial-era fatwas clearly show how both its ordinary
population as well as its ulama (scholars) respond to colonialism as a military-administrative apparatus as well as a cultural mission.

For the colonial study (and, in fact, many modern historians) of Timbuktu’s seventeenth-century chronicles, the authors of these chronicles were no more than faithful recorders of historical information passed down from generation to generation. These chronicles are then misrepresented as more or less passive conduits of tradition. But as Paulo de Moraes Farias has clearly shown, the authors of these chronicles were in fact intellectual innovators and politico-ideological doers. And therefore, as Farias characterises it, the emergence of this tarikh (history) genre in Timbuktu in the second half of the seventeenth century was something special.

All this, I think, means there are exciting possibilities for the decolonisation of knowledge in Timbuktu’s rich manuscript heritage.

References